

My *war-torn* summer

When UF journalism student Alyssa Fisher signed up for an internship in Israel, she didn't expect to embark on a life-changing experience as rockets flew overhead

BY ALYSSA FISHER

It was nearly 4 a.m. in the middle of summer 2014, and I found myself wide-awake in my Tel Aviv apartment, sitting on my cot on the living room floor and researching what to do if a rocket strikes.

While my roommates forced themselves to sleep, I spent the night learning where the nearest bomb shelters were. My sandals were positioned by the front door, ready to be slipped on at a moment's notice.

I listened for rocket-warning sirens all

night, a thick blanket of silence covering the apartment. And I hated it. But the happy-go-lucky episode of "How I Met Your Mother," stayed paused all night as I was braced for the worst.

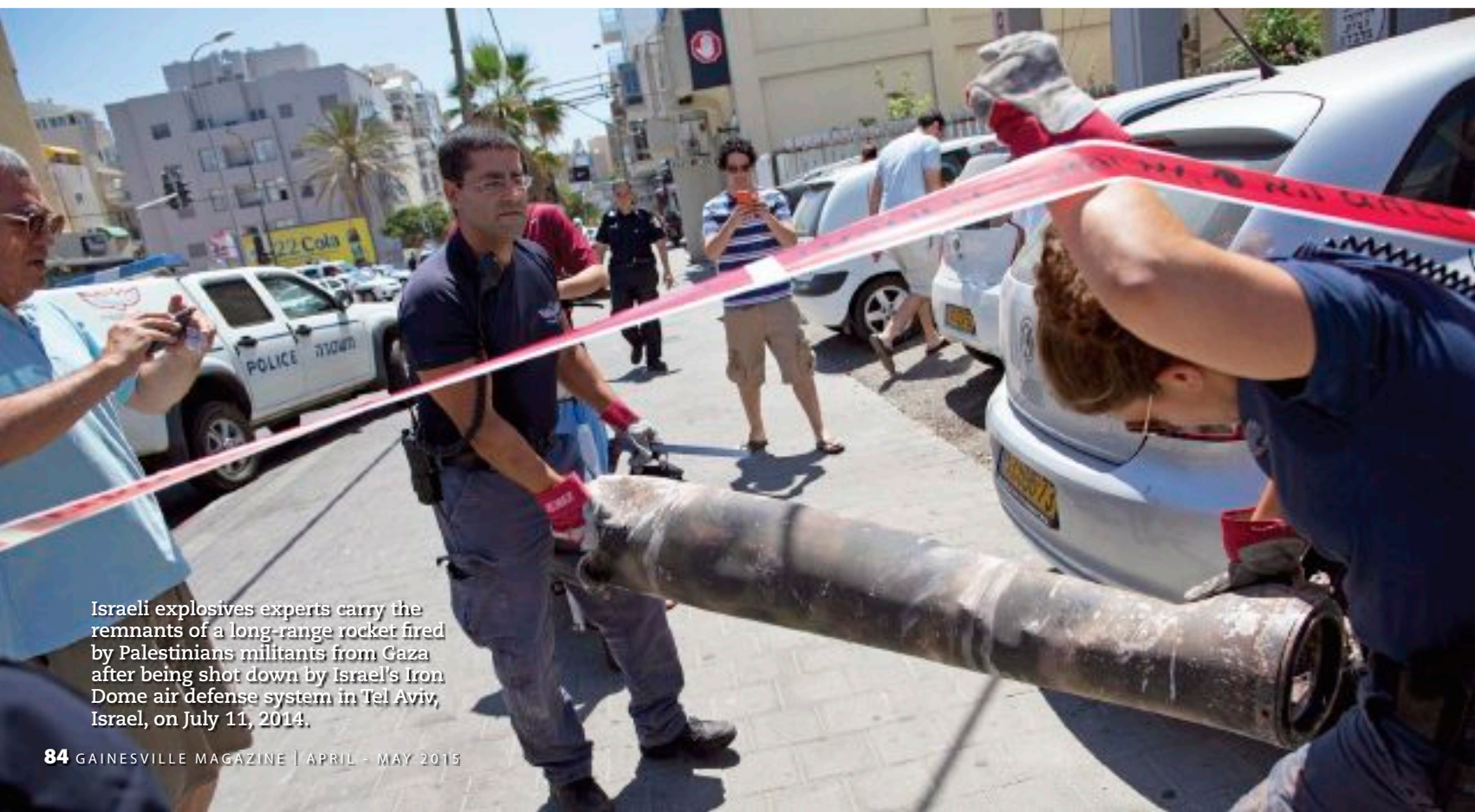
I traveled to Israel last summer hoping for an adventure. And it was, to say the least: I, an average 20-year-old Jewish girl, found myself in the middle of a war zone, in one of the Middle East's biggest conflicts in years.

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The months leading up to summer can be filled with pressure if you are a UF student. The pressure to intern, the pressure to travel and the pressure



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALYSSA FISHER



Israeli explosives experts carry the remnants of a long-range rocket fired by Palestinians militants from Gaza after being shot down by Israel's Iron Dome air defense system in Tel Aviv, Israel, on July 11, 2014.



ABOVE : Alyssa Fisher reporting as part of a news organization internship in Tel Aviv. Her internship followed a 10-day Taglit Birthright trip that provided an overview of Israel.

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to make money have clouded my mind each year, and I felt I needed a complete plan.

Anxiety is something I've struggled with for years, and in an opportunity-rich environment like the UF College of Journalism and Communications, there's much pressure to flourish. Surrounded by talented writers with the gift of reporting, I knew I needed the most impressive internships to land my dream job after graduation. Overwhelmed with wanderlust growing up in a South Florida suburb, I wanted nothing more than to intern abroad.

In the spring of 2014, many of my friends were talking about visiting Israel that summer on Taglit Birthright, a free 10-day trip for Jewish young adults from around the world to explore the Holy Land. I had always heard I needed to go to Israel, where I would connect with my heritage and feel strangely at home. But leaving after merely 10 days sounded miserable, like a tease, so I made arrangements to stay in Tel Aviv, Israel's bustling city, and found an internship at a media company. Friends and family asked if I was scared to go to the country known for controversy and violence. I shrugged — I heard everyone felt safe there.

And I did: The moment the plane from New York to Tel Aviv took off in May, a wave of calm entered my body. Birthright was a great introduction to the country, where I bonded with other UF students and the Israeli Defense Force soldiers, who joined the group half-way through. We visited stunning landscapes and learned the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, focusing on co-existence.

The 10 days of Birthright flashed by, and before I knew it, I was on my own to travel for two weeks before settling in the city with my internship program, which brought 70 people from around the world together to work in their areas of interest. I met friends who opened their homes to me. In a trip to

Hebron, a city in the West Bank, I met a combat soldier who moved from America. My anxiety melted in the bold Israeli sun as I embraced the country's relaxed culture.

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Midway through the summer, I was buying bags of dried fruit at Shuk Ha'Carmel, an outdoor market in Tel Aviv, when my phone buzzed with a text message from the American soldier, hinting at tension in the West Bank. Although he made me nervous, I didn't press for more details.

But later that day, the news alerts told all — and changed everything: The beautiful, peaceful country I had been living in for nearly two months began to change colors. I watched the country swell with emotion as the news broke of the three kidnapped Yeshiva students, the discovery of their bodies and then the murder of a Palestinian teenager. The days passed from hopefulness to sadness to anger. So much anger.

I didn't know what to expect, and I was worried for more retaliation. And then the calls and texts poured in. Nothing big would happen until after I left in August, I said in my attempt to reassure my parents — and myself.

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Usually my fitness group exercised outdoors, but one Tuesday in the beginning of July, my roommate and I signed up to take an indoor boxing class offered at a gym down the street from our apartment. We were playing on our phones in the lobby when the people in the class before ours ran outside, speaking Hebrew much too fast for my understanding.

As they trickled back inside, a few women noticed our confusion and pointed to the sky. "Sirens," one shouted. "There was a rocket."

My heart stopped. This can't be real, I thought. There was no way a rocket was fired from Gaza above Tel Aviv.

A rocket was our alarm in the morning, pushing us out of bed and into the stairway on our floor, the closest alternative to a bomb shelter.

Israelis take cover in an underground parking as siren sounds during a rocket attack fired by Palestinians militants from Gaza in Tel Aviv, Israel.



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I clutched my red gym bag and held it to my heart, unsure of what to do.

“You can wait inside while we finish the class,” my British instructor said to my roommate and me as the group went back inside.

“But shouldn’t we leave?” I asked. “There are rockets.”

“But you haven’t worked out yet,” he answered.

My roommate and I squatted on the floor, watching the class rotate between texting and punching the hanging bags. My own phone was blowing up with concerned texts from all my friends in the country, both Israeli and from my internship program.

One of the next text messages was from my mom, who works at an office on Tuesdays and doesn’t regularly go online. I was afraid she would be getting in the car to leave, so I chose to keep the conversation light.

“No, I think I’m going to stay in tonight,” I typed out in response to her cutesy questions about my day.

I threw the phone down a few minutes later to work out, but the panic never dissipated.

“Punch the bag harder. Pretend you’re punching Hamas,” my trainer joked as I slammed my fist into the red hanging object.

As we exercised, the calm and collected Israelis offered their advice.

“This is our lives; this is always a possibility,” one woman told me as we

stretched at the end of class. “There’s no reason to worry. You’re safe in Tel Aviv.”

They took turns explaining the Iron Dome, the contraption that knocks rockets out of the sky. Listen for the boom, I heard. It means the rocket was intercepted, and the only harm could come with falling shrapnel.

My roommate and I fast-walked through the eerily quiet streets to our apartment to find our other two roommates in the midst of panic. I tried to keep everyone calm as I prepared to do the hardest thing I could imagine: calling my parents.

My mom howled at the news, shrieking through tears that I needed to come home. But there was nothing any of us could do in that moment except stay calm and hope for the best. She cried harder.

A rocket was our alarm in the morning, pushing us out of bed and into the stairway on our floor, the closest alternative to a bomb shelter. My roommates and I held each other as we waited for the boom with our neighbors, who looked at us with teary eyes. After waiting the recommended 10 minutes after the boom, two of my roommates, some of my closest friends, walked back into the apartment and booked flights back home to America.

I sat silently on my cot and eventually mustered up the courage to take the bus to work while they made arrangements

to go home. Was I making a mistake? I wondered. Should I be getting the first flight out, too?

I took my time getting ready, terrified of getting on the 129 bus I took every morning. What if there is another rocket? What if there’s a terrorist attack? The worst of thoughts circled in my head as I swallowed my fears and walked outside, where I found that while the streets weren’t as loud as usual, I wasn’t alone in my trek to work.

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Am I being stupid — should I go home? I asked my friends and myself every day for the week following the first rockets as Operation Protective Edge took shape. After hours of discussion, my friend Jenny and I agreed we would gauge the situation, following the news and taking the advice from our Israeli friends and co-workers. We shook on it: If we ever felt truly in danger, we would leave.

Despite several rocket launches a day, we never did feel unsafe. How could we when life returned to normal merely 10 minutes after the siren? When a rocket sounded one night, threatening to ruin my Mexican dinner with friends, we grabbed our margaritas and followed the waiters into the kitchen, which served as a bomb shelter. We raised our glasses: “L’Chaim! To life!” we shouted, becoming cozy with the

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customers next to us until we resumed our positions outside minutes later, waiting to be seated.

At work, my boss would scoff whenever sirens interrupted our day and forced us into the stairwell. Soon I began to develop the same attitude.

While my mom sent me articles from America highlighting the horrors in Gaza and future turmoil Israel could see, I was live-tweeting and updating documents at the office to be used in news reports. Not only was I always aware of what was going on, but also I was delivering the information to about 12,000 followers.

Yet a dear friend said she didn't support my decision to stay. My parents broke down if I didn't answer a text message within minutes. They would support me one day, but begged me to return home the next. No one could understand why I would elect to stay in a country where rockets flew overhead and a ground invasion was rumored, soon to become true.

I felt like a broken record: I was fine.

The truth was, the situation was tense, and I didn't need my mom calling to tell me this. One day she accused me of not taking this seriously, but I wasn't just ignoring the situation. This was the daily life of my Israeli friends and neighbors; since I was living as an Israeli for the summer, I felt I should stay and do the same. I knew real danger was in Gaza and nearby cities. In Tel Aviv, the Iron Dome was always there.

Gaza was in shambles, and people were dying. I cried when my friend, the American IDF soldier, told me he was being sent there. I was scared for him and for the other young adults sent to fight. I dreaded the chime of the news alerts that brought word of another boy my age being killed in battle. My stomach was in a permanent knot as I prayed my soldier's name did not pop up. Yet even though it never did, I never felt relief, knowing that the fallen was someone else's son, brother, best friend or boyfriend. I learned from a Haaretz article that three boys killed in combat were part of a group I had met just a

few weeks prior — the most numbing news I heard all summer.

Living among Israelis and fearing for a good friend's life filled me with pro-Israeli feelings. I felt proud to be in a country with such strong people who have continued to survive — and thrive — despite the worst of situations throughout its history. But as I tweeted unbiasedly for my internship, reporting the exponentially increasing deaths in Gaza and scrolling through photos of dead children, it was impossible not to feel distraught for those under Hamas' rule. I shook my head as I transcribed pro-Palestinian interviews, not understanding how people couldn't see the terror taking place was a product of Hamas. I felt distress from the damage and loss of life, but Israel was not unscathed, either. I heard so many opinions that it was difficult for me to speak about — I seemed to flip-flop all the time. And the American media didn't make that any easier, as it felt to me unbalanced in favor of Hamas.

But making the decision to stay despite watching my roommates pack and my mother crying on the phone gave me the strength to confidently make my own opinions. I was a new person.

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On August 9th, 89 days since I had left for Israel and 33 days since the operation was launched, I went home.

Smoke and fire from an Israeli strike rise over Gaza City on July 29, 2014.



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I got off the plane and ran into the arms of my hysterical mother, who held me in a tight hug. "You're safe, you're home," she repeated.

I knew I was safe, but I had felt just as safe with my friends in a fantastic city I was depressed to leave. I knew I was home, but after three months there, I had grown comfortable in my tiny apartment on Nahalat Binyamin Street, where I made dinner with local produce and said "boker tov" (good morning) to the arguing men on the street corner every day on my way to work.

But in that one summer, I had experiences of a lifetime, maturing and becoming a more relaxed version of myself. I no longer felt the need to map out my life; instead, I calmed down and decided to take life as it comes. As a journalist found in the middle of the greatly debated situation, I came back with a greater understanding, appreciation and drive for fair reporting.

I laugh when I tell stories of my summer, watching people's faces transition to shock when they learn where I spent it. It does sound insane — how did I, "little Alyssa Fisher," end up in a war-torn country? I don't know: It may have been fate, it may have been coincidence. But I do know what I learned last summer will stay with me for a lifetime. 🍃